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### AUSTRALIAN WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

On 15 October 1996 women in Australia gathered to celebrate the inaugural World Rural Women's Day. The Foundation for Australian Women in Agriculture made a presentation to Prime Minister John Howard, the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, John Anderson and Minister for Social Security and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, Jocelyn Newman. In formally acknowledging World Rural Women's Day, Minister John Anderson stated '...Australian agricultural women have ... been the catalyst for a growing international "women in agriculture movement" which has assisted in highlighting the invaluable contribution of agricultural women to producing the world's food, managing the world's natural resources, and nurturing the families and communities that keep rural areas vibrant and sustainable.'

The day's events highlighted the previously underestimated importance of women in the rural workforce which has been growing in recent years. Through organisations like the Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women, Australian Women in Agriculture and the various Women's Units within agricultural departments at the State and Commonwealth level, women involved in agriculture have promoted a broader and more active role in the full range of agricultural issues. In Australia, major concerns identified by rural women include their under-representation in rural decision-making bodies, a lack of visibility and recognition of women's economic contribution to the rural sector, and improving access to an integrated delivery of services (health, education, childcare, family support and telecommunications technology).

### ABARE's 'WOMEN ON FARMS' SURVEY

In 1994 the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) collected information about women on farms as part of its wider Farm Surveys. This was the first time that such data about the contribution of women on farms have been collated on a large scale. The study covered family-operated farms in the broadacre and dairy industries. For each farm in the sample, a principal contact and their spouse were selected as the people who made most management decisions about the farm (not all farms had both a female and male contact).

Although they represented only a part of the women involved in agriculture, the women interviewed were central figures in the family farm unit, participating in various ways in the roles of wife and mother, part time worker, farmer and/or decision maker. The group did not include all women working on farms; for example other family members and paid employees were excluded from this study.

The women identified in these surveys were involved in the family farm business in several ways: some women worked alone on the farm and were solely responsible for the decision making and operation of the farm, while others shared the decision making about the financial structure of the business, sales and purchases of livestock and crops, farm labour, and family and household duties. Some assisted during the peak times but were not involved in the day-to-day farm operations, while other women worked in the home attending to household duties or had full time, off-farm employment.

The results show that these women spent more time working off-farm than the men. A greater proportion of the women than of the men had a high level of formal education. Women with a high level of education generally worked for longer periods off-farm compared with other women. Women in the dairy industry spent a greater amount of time working on-farm than did their female counterparts in the broadacre industries. However, on farms with relatively higher levels of debt, women in general spent more time working, both on-farm and off-farm.

Women of all ages contributed to on-farm work, with an estimated one-third of females aged between 41 and 50. In addition, women over the age of 70 still contributed to on-farm work. Women spent more time working on-farm on the larger farms while they worked more off-farm for farms with higher capitalisation.

## **SOCIAL ISSUES**

In a 1985 study, commissioned by the Country Women's Association and the Office for the Status of Women (OSW), rural women identified a clear set of priorities. Almost 33% identified financial and economic issues as the single biggest problem facing rural women. 'Rural women want better transport systems and roads to facilitate access to essential services and social contact. They want improved education, training and employment opportunities to broaden their own and their families' economic position and prospects. They want better access to health and community services for themselves and their families, and better telecommunication facilities. These very basic services are crucial in mitigating ...the undesirable effects of isolation.' (Life Has Never Been Easy, Report of the Survey of Women in Rural Australia, Office of the Status of Women and the Country Women's Association of Australia)

ABARE data show that both women and men considered health and social services to be the most important issues affecting rural women. Rural employment opportunities and the performance of the farm business were identified as the most important issues affecting rural centres. The issues perceived to be the most important affecting rural families were educational facilities, rural employment opportunities and the performance of the farm business and the rural sector.

Farming has traditionally been considered a male dominated activity. The 1991 Census showed that 71% of farmers were male and 29% were female. In comparison, across all occupations, 57% of workers were male and 43% were female. There has been a gradual increase over time in the number of women reported as working on farms as a proportion of the total farm workforce. It is possible that the growth in female participation can also be attributed to perceptions that farm women have in regard to their role as farm manager.

ABS data show that there were 72,200 women employed as farmers or farm managers in August 1996. Many of these were in partnership with their husbands. Women represented 30% of all farmers or farm managers. The number of female farmers has remained fairly constant during the last ten years while the numbers of men in farming has fallen by 11%.

There were also many women who worked on farms who were not farmers or farm managers. At August 1996, 123,900 women worked in agriculture or industries that service agriculture (about 30% of the agricultural workforce). This compares with 63,900 in August 1966 (or 15% of the agricultural workforce at that time). Over the period 1966 to 1996 women employed in the Agricultural sector increased by 94% (see table 14.5 below).

## 14.5 EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND SERVICES TO AGRICULTURE, Australia

	Numbers employed at August				Farmers and farm managers at August			
	1966 '000	1976 '000	1986 '000	1996 '000	1966 '000	1976 '000	1986 '000	1996 '000
Males	348.1	287.6	278.6	272.9	227.9	205.0	188.3	168.1
Married females	48.2	71.0	94.7	101.9	n.a.	n.a.	66.7	65.3
All females	63.9	82.9	112.9	123.9	26.5	26.4	73.7	72.2
<b>All persons</b>	<b>412.0</b>	<b>370.5</b>	<b>391.4</b>	<b>396.8</b>	<b>254.4</b>	<b>231.4</b>	<b>262.0</b>	<b>240.2</b>

Source: Labour Force, Australia (6203.0) and Labour Force, Australia (6204.0).

Labour Force data indicate noticeable changes in female employment in the rural sector. 'Women have always been important in maintaining the family farm but with changes in employment mix and growth in part-time work their participation in rural labour markets has risen dramatically' (Lewis in Agriculture in the Australian Economy, edited by D.B. Williams). Both full-time and part-time employment have increased, more so part-time which has increased substantially, with nearly all of this change attributed to married rather than single women. The increase in part-time employment can be explained by the mix between household duties and the nature of farm work. The supply of female labour is well suited to the requirements of farm work, especially given that technological change has reduced the need for strenuous physical work. 'Greater emphasis on maintaining accounts and the business management side of farming also provide opportunity for women to use their skills effectively' (Lewis). Economic pressures seem to have contributed to the increase in female farm employment. In many cases male farmers have sought off-farm income and transferred a range of farm duties to their partner.

## EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS

A recent study found that 'Women on farms are more likely to hold higher educational qualifications than male farmers and are also more likely to undertake retraining to provide financial security for families' (Cameron, 1994). This in part reflects women from farms also holding off-farm jobs, and enables them to do so. It probably also reflects past patterns of farmers' sons leaving school to provide on-farm labour and learning farming in that way. Today, many parents 'aware of the difficulties facing the agricultural industry, encourage their children to broaden their training. Many who train with a view to returning to the land subsequently find that a degree or experience in business management is a sufficiently versatile qualification to permit employment in non-farm areas' (Epps, 1993). Of all students at the post-secondary institutions, 3.6% of females study farm-related courses (i.e. agriculture, animal husbandry or veterinary science) (Dawe, 1993).

## COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Looking to the future, women and men in rural Australia are well poised to take advantage of developments in technology with services such as Farmwide Online Computer Pilot, which is run by the National Farmers' Federation. Farmwide provides access to the Internet, e-mail and a wide range of rural services. This pilot aims to facilitate and accelerate the uptake of online services in rural Australia and to determine the specific information and communication needs of rural and regional Australia.

Women have always played a significant role in Australian agriculture, in the nation's farm houses, paddocks and rural communities. Increasingly they are involved in planning and farm

management, and decision making. Many of them also support the farm finances through their off-farm employment. In recent years there has been growing recognition for the many roles they play in agriculture.

Source: Year Book Australia 1997

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